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"Dear D.B. ..."
by A. R. Morlan
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Horror

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At first, I only thought that good old Super-super goofed, again. After all, the man's command of the "Engleesh as she is spoken" isn't the best to begin with (but you would think that living in the City for umpteen years would make a difference sometimes I'm sure that English is doomed to become the United States' second language), but even he should know the difference between gringa and gringo (at least that's how I think the "Spanish she is spoken" I never did take that course back in Ewerton High) but at the time I decided that it would not do to gripe about it. He does allow me to keep Wolfie and Duke (neither of whom will ever be mistaken for lap dogs) up here in the apartment, which is not the most common practice here in New York City. (And if I'm not a good girl, he'll confiscate his Roach Motels!)

Anyhow, Roach Motels and the boys aside, when Mr. Hernandez said what he did to me, I had just gotten back my proofs for "The Mouth That Would Not Die" from Bloodbath Quarterly. The editor scribbled that the "...That Wouldn't Die" sounded a bit "flip." As in Wilson, I was tempted to scribble back in the margins, but you learn to keep such thoughts to yourself especially when there's a five foot high slush pile generated by writers just dying to get a shot at BQ. (Instead, I told myself I'd change it back when the anthology of my work came out.) As usual, the galleys came back with the standard note, "Running late, get back ASAP," and so on. I had only found three typos, all minor, when Mr. Hernandez knocked, asking for the rent, and for once he didn't make some crack about (pick one or more): my halter top, my shorts, my body, and/or my single female status. (Thank goodness for two mammoth male doggies at a time like that! And I used to think good ole Dead Fred Ferger back home in Wisconsin was bad! Spare me from the Latin lover type!)

Instead of his usual "How's de preety senyorita?" line, Mr. H. kept it short, but right before he left, he bent down to itch Wolfie's head and said something about, "You boys protect the young gringo, okay?" but I didn't really think about it until after I took a second look at the proof sheets (noticing the initials of the guy who typeset my story in the upper left hand corner of the first page he was the one that the editor at Gore Magazine wrote to me about; she said that he really liked "that D.B. Winston's stuff" if I remembered her letter correctly), and even then, I figured that Mr. H. made a simple mistake ... but after I went to the drugstore, what Mr. Hernandez said began to niggle at the back of my mind.

Not that the trip to the drugstore and back was eventful but, in a way, that was the problem. All I had picked up was a box of tampons, some cheap

typing paper (is there any other kind?) and a few stamps from one of those mini mail-box shaped dispensers (the kind that gobbles your quarters and usually forgets to stick out a tongue of stamps), and even though a few of the toughs from the neighborhood were lounging around the counter and by the door for once they didn't give me a hard time. Once, one of them offered to help me "put in" a feminine product (shades of Dead Fred and his "can I trim your bush?" remarks), but this time they just stood around gassing, playing with the dials on their boom boxes (which I swear grow out of their shoulder blades) and scaring the bejesus out of out-of-towners who happen to find themselves in this part of the city (not your highlight tourist attraction here!). And I actually made it back to the apartment house unaccosted

...and I didn't have the boys along for moral support, either. (When I walk the dogs, no one approaches me if the boys don't scare them off, there's always the option of beaming someone over the head with the pooper scooper!)

But that day, I only figured I'd lucked out. It wasn't until I called the super to come and take a look at my leaking faucet (the roaches were taking sides for swimming teams in my sink) a week later that I realized something was wrong, really off-kilter. For one thing, Mr. H. who usually broke both legs running to come spend time with the gringa made some excuse about not being able to make it until after supper. I figured that perhaps he didn't realize it was me, the "Preeety senyorita," so I said who was calling, taking pains to pronounce my name very plainly, and after I did, there was this pause on his end of the line, and I could hear this Spanish-language radio or TV station in the background (like something out of "The Possession of Joel Delaney," the part when Shirley MacLame goes slumming in search of help for her brother) and only after I'd shouted "Hello?" into the speaker a few times he came back on the line, muttering that he'd be up right away, but before I hung up I heard him grumble something about the "loco gringo". At the time, I thought to myself, Maybe you should write "I Am Woman" across the front of your tee, since it did seem funny ... then. As it was, Mr. H's visit was uneventful; he growled that he had his food waiting on the hotplate, and hurriedly fixed the faucet, but as he was leaving (and Mr. "Do Not Disturb Night Job Sleeping" Door Sign as if a "Night Job" was an entity that needed sleep! was just leaving his apartment across the hall), Hernandez happened to say to himself, "Goddamn loco gringo sonsabitch," which prompted Mr. "Night Job Sleeping" to chortle "Goo'night, fellah" at me. I almost sicced Wolfie and Duke on him, but figured, why waste the effort? They might have gotten food poisoning from the jerk. I decided to get them to bark at his door some day ... his sign didn't say "No Barking!"

However, I didn't get a chance to mull over the day's events; since the BQ editor called; would I consider some last-minute editing on "The Mouth That..."? Nothing major, just a few changes near the end? After scrambling around for a copy of the MS (not much of a scramble, considering the size of my Roach-Motel room) I dictated the changes over the phone, and at that point things really began to get weird, for between lines, he kept asking "Got a cold, D.B.?" "Can you speak up?" "Bad connection," and I wouldn't have paid any undue attention to that if I'd still been living in Ewerton, where bad connections were the norm but he was calling from an office only a couple of miles away at the most! After he hung up I told myself I'd have to get Super-super to come and look at it (since Ma Bell was slaughtered, calling the phone people is a fool's errand!) when he got himself some glasses, or after I made up my "I Am Woman" shirt.

And that was when things were still fairly normal.

Two weeks later I got my check for "The Mouth That..." and I went to the bank to try and cash it. I hadn't been in for about a month, but that isn't an eternity ... yet the teller, a woman who I thought would recognize me (I'd been to her a few times before, during other visits) acted like I'd caught the first ship from Mars and landed on the roof of the building five minutes before, and jumped down to the lobby through the ceiling. Now I'm not

a naive person, even though I was born and raised in a small town. I'm aware of the fact that New Yorkers simply don't have the time to be slavishly polite to every Tom, Dick, and Henrietta who walks through the door (unless they work at Bloomies and are busy trying to get you to submit to a cosmetic makeover then they act like they'll sell you the city for a string of beads and some feathers!) but I was expecting a teller at my bank to treat me like a human being.

The woman gave me a strange look when I submitted my check and passbook (for deposit of part of the check; I'm not crazy enough to spend the whole thing at a pop), looking from the book to me and back again, like something wasn't computing for her. She began to act as if I'd just handed her a scribbled note topped with the words "This is a Stickup!" and stammered something about needing some "recent identification," and I reached over, took my things, and said for her to forget it, and left, while she stared at me as if I was Al Pacino carrying a long flower box under one arm. While I walked to the subway station, I began to think about the past few days and decided that the Big Apple (as the folks back home love to call it when I phone them in the background I can hear Mom yell "Arlin, c'mere, it's our girl calling from the Big Apple!") had gone wormy for me. I mean, Ewerton was bad it was deeply entrenched in that old system of "Oh, you're Arlin Winston's girl," or "Her? She's old Palmer Winston's grandchild," or worse, "Devorah? That's old man Winston's son's little girlie." When I got my driver's license, I had almost expected it to say "Devorah Bambi Winston, daughter of Arlin, son of Palmer, grandson of Porter," or something semi-Biblical like that. It was so frustrating; if I had stayed back home I wouldn't have ever had a chance to be me, but I would have either been dubbed "So and so's child," or "the such-and-such girl," or if I had married one of the local-yokel Ewerton males, eventually I would have become "Joe Blow's wife," or "the mother of Dick and Jane" and so on to infinity. Part of the reason why I cleared out of there was the fact that I had had no hope of carving out an identity for myself; in a small town a person is never a person, period, but either the offspring of someone or the parent of another ... at least in New York, I figured that a person would be known only as his or her self without a centipede-like trail of relatives hanging behind them. All I wanted to be was me, D. B. Winston, writer, but after all this gringo and "better identification" stuff, I was beginning to wonder if I should go and have my gender and vital statistics tattooed across my forehead!

Crawling out of my pool of self-pity long enough to look up for my station number, I noticed that I was sitting in a subway car full of boom-box babes, all big, all poorly dressed ... and all leaving me alone. And there wasn't a Guardian Angel in sight.

When I reached my stop, I hurried off, hoping to leave before my traveling companions came to their senses. During the walk home, I toyed with the idea of working this all into a story. It had worked for me in the past ... as evidenced by my still uncashed check.

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After a bit of arm-twisting I got the super to cash my check for me (I used an automatic teller to make my deposit later on), and settled down with a new stock of groceries (and seeming tons of Alpo!), trying to catch up on my writing. Just for the hell of it, I began a story called "The Metamanphosis" While I was busy writing that, the BQ editor sent me a black and white photo mockup of the cover for the next issue a real stunner. I'd had my name on the cover of more than a few issues, but this time was the first time that a cover illo had been based on my story. I liked the way Potter put the reflection (distorted, of course) of the killer on the old-man's spittle-moist teeth, inside the cavern of that drooling, vacant mouth. And next to that: A HAIR-RAISING TALE OF NEIGHBORLY REVENGE THE MOUTH THAT WOULD NOT DIE! BY D. B. WINSTON. As I looked it over, I realized why the editor had opted for the title change; this way it was a bit more on the Lovecraftian side. If only my Grandpa Winston (the former English Lit teacher) could have seen that! (I

wondered if Gramps would have had trouble with my gender, too...) But the story beckoned, a sure five hundred dollars if I could get it done and accepted at a pro 'zine, so I put the cover mock-up aside and got down to business, thinking that the heroine/hero of the story was the only with with big problems....

By the seventh of June, I realized that I had it with crazy New Yorkers. Never mind the gringo bit of the month before, or Mr. "Night Job Sleeping"'s jibes (I'd give him something to go banging his walls and bellowing about!), or even the snafu at the bank just who would have thought that the sort of thing would happen at Bloomies? (Saks, maybe, but good old Bloomies? My God, they let Paul Mazursky make that movie there! If Robin Williams could defect there, I thought they'd be good sports about almost anything!)

Hold on, try to calm down. I must try to figure out what went on, where it all went wrong. (Put it down, good old black and white.) But thinking about it, even after everything else which has happened, still makes me shake ... it didn't seem like the end of the world, not then. But it was close.

Anyhow I went there to buy myself a new half-slip, some panties, and maybe a nightgown if the pennies stretched far enough. So. Once through the door, I made my way past the endless cosmetic counters, mildly surprised that the floorwalkers didn't rush up to me, begging me to let them spritz me with some much-too-expensive perfume, hoping I'd find it irresistible and buy five gallons of the slop, or just spray me and ask later for permission. Usually, by the time I'd made it to the second floor I'd end up smelling like a cheap streetwalker on Friday night, but that day I lucked out and escaped the scented hordes. It really seemed like my day, no Lorelei-like calls from the cosmetic clerks, begging me to wander over for a makeover, and I rode the crowded escalators until I found the intimate apparel. I was happily looking over the unmentionables, no stuffing things into my jeans pockets, no hiding panties in a false-bottom bag, simply minding my own biz-niz ... when the saleslady came up, hovering like a polycotton hummingbird. With too much eyeshadow. She began to pester me, asking if I was looking for "something for a special someone?" Not understanding why she couldn't go bother one of the dozens of other shoppers milling around us, I said, "No thanks, just browsing until I find something I like." I held a pair of panties up to the light, trying to see how sheer they were, when she tried another line of questioning:

"Did you happen to have someone special in mind? Maybe that would aid in your selection "

Thinking Read my lips, honey, I tossed over my shoulder, "Just looking for something for myself ... if you don't mind. Thanks for asking!" She didn't leave. I could smell her, and feel her breathing down my neck. Turning around, I saw her give me a look, like I had feathers growing out of my ears, or a less appropriate part of my anatomy, then exit Ms. Too Much Eyeshadow. Followed shortly by my exit. I figured that she'd have to take a coffee break sometime; I'd check out the undies then. Walking away, I remembered that the World Fantasy Con would be coming up soon, and decided to check out the junior dresses.

Bad move. And no warning signs this time; the salesclerk initially left me alone, in peace, while I looked over the racks of new fall arrivals and she didn't even flinch when I picked out two reasonably priced streetlength dresses (one with a side slit, the other a sweater-dress) and approached the counter. Then

Her: "Yes, will that be cash, charge or "

Me: "Oh, no, not yet ... could I please try them on? I have two items here "

Her: (look of utter "slap-me-silly" shock on her face) "Uhhh "

Me: (getting mucho disturbed) "Okay, I'll leave one here and take them in one at a time, if that's the prob "

Her: "I'm sorry, sir, but you don't understand, this isn't that kind of store "

Me: (completely disturbed now) "_Sir?_ Are you _blind,_ ma'am? All I want to do is try on these dresses "

Her: "I I I'm afraid that you can't do that, at least not here "

Me: (something _beyond_ disturbed) "Miss, is there a _problem?_ Is there a limit on the number of dresses I can take in there? Are you afraid I'll shoplift these? You are welcome to come in the dressing room _with_ me if that's what's got you worried "

Her: (barely stifled scream, by now we have an _audience_)

"Please-leave-this-store-immediately! Be-_fore_ I have to call the manager" All of the above with a plastered-on _smile,_ for cryin' out loud. Thinking that I would have caused less of a disturbance if I'd put my head under her skirt like Robin Williams did to Maria Conchita Alonso in that damned _film,_ I threw the dresses on the floor by now people were openly staring, then shoved their noses in Fabric Care tags when I stomped past and started doing a number on my Bloomies Charge card with my nail clippers while riding the escalators to the ground floor. I hope all the little pieces jammed up the mechanism, too.

During my ride home my unmolested, unpinched ride home I wondered if New York was going through a gender-blindness epidemic of some sort.

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Not long after the Bloomies fiasco, my contributor's copies arrived, along with a little note from the _BQ_ editor, which was to let me know that in this year's _BQ_ Reader's Poll I'd placed as the fifth most requested author, up six places from last year, et cetera, et cetera. There was more, but at the time I wasn't in the mood to read on. I mean, I figured he didn't _know_ what was happening to me. And I wasn't about to call him up and announce, "Hey, by the way, the _funniest_ thing happened at Bloomies last week, even better than that scene in "Moscow on the Hudson" where Robin Williams puts his head under the sales clerk's skirt. Only they wouldn't even let me try _on_ a skirt, let alone "

He probably would have attributed it to my fertile mind, my writer's flair for the dramatic ... but even Larry Olivier couldn't top _this_ situation's dramatics. And no one could be this imaginative.

The dogs, my _boys,_ my trusty Wolfie and Duke, began looking at me strangely. And they sniffed me more, the wary type of snuffle with no wagging tail they used to reserve for good ole Dead Fred the helpful back home neighbor (bless his nosey soul!) and now for Mr. H. when he comes down for the rent. It couldn't _be,_ not _really_ but the dogs were acting as if _I_ smelled like an old man.

By the next day, I realized that something was _bad_ wrong. When I picked up the phone on the second ring, the _BQ_ editor asked _me_ if _I_ was home! I didn't know if he bought my line about a bad connection, but I kept crinkling the wrapper from the boys' Gaines Burgers (even Lorne Green would gag on Alpo day after day) next to the receiver, so I think that maybe I fooled him and doing something like that to him made me feel like week-old fishbowl scum. The call was about the novella he'd bought some time ago would I mind if he split it into three parts, and ran it in three issues? I was so rattled by then I almost made the suggestion that I'd be happy if he ran it a line at a time until kingdom come, but then reason shut my mouth for me, warning, _Why blame this mess on your editor?_ So far he hadn't called me "Sir" or _gringo!_ However, once he hung up, I dug out my old cassette recorder from under the bed and taped my voice, then played it back. It sounded fine and feminine to me, but it made the boys howl ... and the sound of Mr. "Night Job Sleeping" banging on the wall was sweet music to me, but by the following day nothing could have made me smile.

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That day, what went on went beyond _wrong,_ bypassed _strange_ and entered _bizarre_ at full tilt. And all I did was go down the hall to the _bath_room,_ something I've done hundreds of times since moving to the city, to this apartment-cum-tenement. And while I wasn't actually friends (or even very

friendly) with the people on my floor, things were non-hostile enough to allow for a bit of overlapping when it came to using bathroom stalls; after all, total strangers use the same restroom at the same time in all sorts of public places with no hassle. At least I knew the other tenants by sight and occasionally by name (from matching bodies with name plates on mail slots), and they likewise "knew" me. Or so I had assumed. And I thought that Mrs. Pendelton (Miss? Ms? All I knew was that she always took the Social Security checks out of the box labeled "Pendelton, S.") was one of the friendlier souls on my floor, at least she'd grunt "'Lo" as she passed by a person in the hallway, hunched over her walker. Even the boom-box babes on the corner didn't bother her. But that day you could have heard her clear into the Bronx, the way she carried on when she lurched out of the stall and found me at the sink washing my hands. Goggling at me from behind her trifocals, chins quivering, papery white lips working in indignation, and then yelling: "Ain't you got no decency? Getcha kicks outta _listening? Pre-vert! Raised in a _baaarn?_ No sense of _shame,_ young man? Terrible, just _terrible!_ Listenin' in on old ladies! Pig!" And she tread on my instep with her walker as she passed me for good measure. (And it hurt like nobody's business! She came on like some sort of Hell's Grandma!)

I thought I could hear Mr. "Night Job Sleeping" laughing at me all the way from the bathroom to my room. When I got in, locked the door and sank on to a kitchen chair, the boys wouldn't even lick my hands.

No doubt they thought I was a "_pre-vert" too.

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Venturing out only when nature's call couldn't be ignored, I worked in isolation on the rest of "The Metamanphosis," and on a whim I decided to try sending it in to that holy-of-literary-holies, Skin Magazine. The one the 7-Elevens wouldn't touch with two flag poles soldered together. I figured it wouldn't hurt; one of the assistant editors there knew my work from previous tries, and once I got a handwritten note scribbled on the bottom of a rejection slip, telling me to please try again, that the editor of the magazine knew my work from Bloodbath and liked it. They got my name wrong on the note, calling me "Dear Mr. Winston." The note was a nice touch, and since I'd be appearing in the next three issues of BQ anyhow, I decided to give Skin a shot at "The Metamanphosis."

If I had any hopes of pulling stakes out of this dump (the nerve of that old biddy!) I had to start pulling in contracts from the top markets ... a lot of them.

In retrospect, sending in that story to Skin Magazine was the best thing I ever did considering the circumstances I had fallen into but at the time, when I finally got it through my hick skull what was going on, I didn't want to believe it.

After a month of slinking to the bathroom, avoiding Mr. Hernandez and his mumbled gringo remarks by sliding the rent under his door before it was due, and telling myself that it was normal for a woman not to hear lewd comments from men on the street (despite the fact that I still wore skimpy summer garb) I got a call not from Bloodbath, but from Skin Magazine... and not just from someone in the fiction department. I was speaking to Mr. Father-of-Skin himself, the Man Mr.-Meese-Would-Love-To-Bring-To-His-Knees, the editor. Him, his Skin ness, talking to me. The clods back in Ewerton would have done number two in their sanctimonious overalls while tsk-tsking in horror (the few stores in Ewerton which reluctantly stock Bloodbath Quarterly only do so for a week before ripping off the covers and tossing the pages in the dumpsters, ever since that braless she-demon graced the Fall cover a couple of years back welcome to the Bible Belt, folks!) while the hometown girl passed the time of day with Mr. Pornography, Esq. Actually, the guy seemed very nice, not sexist at all.

Very politely, he asked for "Denton Blair" (my pen name if my mom's egg had got it on with a Y sperm instead of an X way back when, it would have been my real name), then corrected himself when he noticed my real name D.B.

Winston typed at the top of the page, next to the "Member, SFWA." (I suppose days spent oogling bare, tanned flesh can mess up a guy's eyesight.) Either way, he wasn't surprised that I was a woman (while we chatted, I thought how nice, a man who prints beaver shots who isn't a macho "where's your husband little woman" boor...), then he got to the point; he wanted to run "The Metamorphosis" in the January issue, and my heart almost pounded right through my chest and popped out of my t-shirt (John Hurt with his Alien-in-the-chest would have had nothing on me), and I had to keep reminding myself, Don't grovel, woman! Don't drool on the receiver and electrocute yourself! Suppose he wants some revisions!

As I mentally congratulated myself for making a sale to Skin without an agent (mine, mine, the money will be all miiiiine!) I had to do a double-take when the editor said, "You had me going there, D.B., the part in the story where the protagonist is still a woman is fantastic I do know my women, and I almost believed for a minute there that you are a woman! Believe me, man, that is no mean feat, fooling an old 'letch' like me! By the way, I've been following your Bloodbath work, and I wish we'd have grabbed some of your stuff sooner you're right up there, fellah. Not a King or Barker yet, but someday, right? One more thing, do you still want to run this under the Denton Blair name or okay, I'll change it right now. Well, nice talking to you, D.B., and thanks for thinking of us..." and so on, and when he finally got off the line I threw down the receiver and began to paw through my files (some system an old cardboard box from Keebler cookies I keep under my bed ... I don't think Stephen King ever did it this way), looking for all my correspondence, rejection slips, contracts, and whatnot.

After culling what I wanted, I spread the mass of papers out on the floor (the dogs were stretched out against the walls, rumbling at me, heads on paws, eyes half-lidded), and began looking them over carefully, pausing only to swat away an occasional roach ... looking at the pages fearfully, too....

It was all there, in unwavering black on white. My name, "D.B. Winston," on my submissions (upper right hand coner, except for the occasional wise-guy editors who wanted it on the left hand side, like it mattered), no "Devorah," no "Ms.," or "Miss," or any indication of my sex, no inkling given that "D.B. Winston" was a woman. Oh, occasionally my checks from Bloodbath including the one which caused me so much grief at the bank came addressed to "Devorah Winston," since the editor there wormed the name out of me while I was still living back in Ewerton, but those checks were the exception, not the rule ... according to my contracts, my few magazine subscriptions, and my bills, I was "D.B. Winston, Neuter"... except now, even that was subject to debate....

Likewise, those 'zines which sent me either handwritten or personalized form rejections were all part of the pattern either "Dear D. B." or "Dear D.B.W" or "Dear D.B. Winston," or, much worse, "Dear Mr. Winston"... something which had ohmigod! amused me before! While the people who knew me, who saw me daily, still thought I was a woman. What did the opinion of someone I'd never seen matter? I knew that I was a woman, and everyone else seemed to know it when they saw me ... then the loss of my literary femininity didn't seem very threatening. In fact, I figured it was helping me! Apparently others thought the same thing; one of the letters I got from the editor over at Gore Magazine (who did realize that I was a woman) put it best: "It's fun when I get the occasional comment about D.B. Winston: that guy's work is really good.' Tee-hee. Ah, the prejudices of the genre. Did you know that V.C. Andrews didn't know about her publisher substituting her initials until her first book came out?"

I only hoped that V.C. Andrews didn't have to go through this happy horseshit! Maybe that's why she gave interviews, telling people about the change ... but I think that people at least guessed that she was a she. But most of my stories take a male point of view (or woodpile creature point of view, and so on), so the readers and editors had no way of knowing unless I actually told them that I was a woman. I picked up a rejection slip from

that new small press 'zine, Prophetic!, and read with blurring eyes, "All this time, my husband and I thought D.B. Winston was a man! What a surprise to see you sign your name 'Ms.'" That cover letter, the one I signed with a 'Ms.' (a rarity for moi, it must have been Susan B. Anthony's birthday, or some other such pro-feminist occasion) was a pure exception on my part, and I hadn't signed one like that to a new magazine I'd submitted to in months. Even my personal correspondence was genderless, and generated male-oriented responses ("Dear Mr. Winston, We are sorry you were dissatisfied with new Doggie Dinners..."), all of which seemed so funny at the time. With a growing sense of dis-ease, I scanned the contributor's copies of the zines which had run my material, and was confronted with table of contents after of table of contents crediting my stories to "D.B. Winston" or "Denton Blair," (and remembered that all the junk mail in my kitchenette garbage bag was addressed to "Mr. D.B., et cetera" once I realized that the Great Computer Network Hook-Ups had my gender wrong, I was sure that I was doomed!) and on top of it, few of the magazines I had things published in bothered with author's pages (even if they did, how many people actually read those things?)

As the editor at Gore had pointed out, most of the writers in my field are men; readers expect them to be men, for who knows what reason. It was that automatic assignment of gender on the part of readers that led me to use my initials instead of my name on my work, and played a part on my choice of a male nom de plume. Years ago, I had read an article about breaking into the publishing market that suggested that men have an edge when it comes to certain genres, and since I never liked my name anyway (to me, Devorah Bambi Winston had that good old cheerleader-Pom-Pom-Girl-Prom-Queen-Sorority-Sister ring to it, and plain old Devorah Winston had a small-town-paper-mill-office-clerk-playing-with-her-typewriter feel to it ... which is what I was at first, when I started submitting things), so using my initials had seemed so appealing, so natural, so crisply efficient ... and, unbeknownst to me, so very masculine, not merely androgonous, as I had hoped.

Crazy as it all sounded, it did make sense; wasn't that editor astonished to find out that I was really a woman? Which, in turn, meant that the impression that she and her husband had gotten that I was a man, a strong one? And those readers writing to the Gore editor, about liking that "guy's work." After all, didn't Peter Pan, or some other fairy-tale kidlet, say that "wishing makes it so"? (I know he said "Clap your hands for Tinkerbelle," and all that!) So, if that's the case, wouldn't "Thinking makes it so" also apply? A wish begins as a thought ... suddenly I remembered the note that the BQ editor put in with my contributor's copies, the one with the reader's survey results. That meant that a lot of readers a lot of very imaginative horror and fantasy loving (and believing? I wondered) readers had asked for my stories, many of them no doubt thinking (believing) that I was a man. I found the note, and if I had had doubts before

"...fifth most requested author, behind Bloch and Williamson and Koontz, and you'd be surprised to see who else you topped on the list. Some of the readers can't help but scribble comments in the margins about their favorites, and about you they wrote, 'He's my favorite,' and 'That Winston dude scares me'. I guess the readers really got into those macho-hero adventures about pagan sacrifices and bird-blood worship you wrote while you were living in Ewerton."

That was the capper. If only he had written one "Tee hee," or "I set them straight," or ... I could only come to one conclusion. Even though he used to know that I am a woman, somehow, he had forgotten ... or his mind had told him something else ... or maybe, because so many people now believe that I am a man, he's doing so as a matter of course. Even the people I had just met, all of them were treating me as if I were actually a man.

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It was funny, but after I finally figured it out (more or less); figured out

what happened to me, I couldn't do anything about it!_ Bellevue may be overcrowded, but it was within the city limits and convenient. A good place to hide the "pre-verts" who pretend to be women....

What made me hurt above and beyond the embarrassment the shouting, the bruised instep where old Mrs. Pendleton tromped on it was the fact that even telling people that I was a woman didn't seem to help anymore.

Then, while I sat on the floor, hardly noticing the tickle of roach legs on my legs, I thought of something. And got to work.

By the time I was through, my hands and fingers were a hurting, my eyes were blurred from staring at endless black letters (sort of slate grey towards the end) marching across illuminated white paper, my tongue was coated with that slimy, gummy residue from licking too many stamps and envelope flaps (why wouldn't those damned dogs lick something besides their paws and fannies?) but, finally, I was done. And I thought that it might work. Had to work. Please, pretty please with sugar on top work ... and sugar on the bottom, if that might help.

From the afternoon when I sat on the floor, bemoaning my bizarre fate, to the day when I finally called it quits a month later, I had written eight short stories, three poems and a criticism of faceless/personalityless/mindless killers in 1980s dead-teenager mad slasher flicks ("Down with 'Jasonism' or Norman Bates Won't You Please Phone Your Mother?"). Plus cover letters for each submission with my full name, as in "Ms" and "Miss" added to the bottom sign-off the works. I had to wait until dark to send them off (in a weird way I missed the sexist comments from strange guys) to both magazines which knew my work but not my sex as well as newer zines I'd never tried before. Even though I left late someone yelled "Drag Queen" at me from across the street and I was only wearing a sundress! (It was too hot even for shorts, and besides, I thought that maybe I had to do a little believing on my own, to speed up the process...)

Only a week later, I couldn't help but think of that kiddie book, about The Little Engine That Could, who said "I think I can, I think I can;" only in my case it was more like "I think I am I think I am a WOMAN!" It happened! A cabbie, one I'd never seen before, who brought me home from a movie I took in one night (only fools and vampires ride the subways come night, whether people think they are men or not!) actually said "Thanks, lady," when I told him to keep the change. I could have kissed the slob, three days' stubble or not! And better yet, I soon got back replies on most of the things I sent out; all with either rejection slips or contracts (!) addressed to "Miss" or "Ms." Winston!

I figured that it had to be working; Mrs. Pendleton didn't snort and toss her hair-netted head when she saw me coming down the hall, and Mr. Hernandez had finally stopped calling me a "loco gringo." All this put me in such a good mood I even considered springing for a long-distance call home. You know, "reach out and touch someone" sung in soprano, for a change! The dogs were even licking my hands again, no more rumbling and tail-thump-less greetings. I decided to brave Bloomies again, too.

My wonderful mood continued when I got my contributor's copies of Bloodbath; the Potter cover was even better in color. Seeing it reminded me that I had to contact the editor about changing my name on future issues, but I figured that I had plenty of time for that. That night I tried calling home, no answer. They probably were at the bowling alley-cum-arcade, renting video tapes or something stimulating like that. I decided to try a daytime call, what the hell, surprise the folks, make 'em happy. Share the feeling.

More joy the next day; my check my great big check came from Skin Magazine for "The Metamanphosis," made out to "D.B. Winston." Looking it over, I decided to write The Editor and let him know that I wanted the by-line of the story changed. Shouldn't be a biggie, I told myself, kicking myself for actually forgetting something like a sale to Skin! Maybe I had wanted to forget it, make it not so by forgetting that something in my life had prompted such a tale ... besides, I was sure that Mr. Skin Editor would get a kick out of the "Bambi" part of my name. I couldn't wait to tell my

folks about the big check, but there was no answer in either the morning, afternoon, or evening. Slightly saddened, I tacked the check in a place on honor above my bed and resolved to call again the following morning ... but something kept me from making that morning call.

The mailman had a hard time getting my contributor's copies from Skin into my box; the envelope covering them was badly torn. When I saw them, I ran down the street to the nearest kiosk, and found that the latest issue of Skin Magazine, with "D.B. Winston's "The Metamorphosis" a Study of the Ultimate Identity Crisis!" advertised on the front cover, just to the left of the model's barely covered nipple, was out for sale.

I zombie-walked back to my apartment ("the Ultimate Identity Crisis!") and after I locked the door behind me, I sat down on the bed to read the "Under the Skin" author's section. A brief mention of me was in there, a few lines about my publishing history, capped by the line "he is one of the best up-and-coming horror writers in America."

He, as in me. I looked in the tattered envelope which had held my contributor's copies. There was a note in there, written on Skin-logo paper. From the Editor. Said how much he liked, no loved the story, how he bumped an Updike from this issue to make room for my tale, so that his readers could enjoy it now. Said again how the first part had almost fooled him. Said he enjoyed talking to me in July. Said I should subscribe, special rate, to Skin, so he could use my name and likeness ("send a pic, should've asked in July, but the story just blew my mind and I forgot to ask") in those advertisements he runs in the front of Skin "Denton Blair Winston a Skin Reader and proud of it." Said I should think it over and call, collect. Said there'd be money in it for me. Said I should come to the mansion, meet the "gang." Said his readers were bound to go wild over the story. Said I seemed to be a great guy.

He's right. Now. The man isn't only rich. He's influential.

As I finished the letter, Mom and Dad called me; they'd seen the new Skin on the back stands at the Ewerton Pharmacy, and wanted to let me know how happy they were. Dad said he's proud of his son. Mom said she hoped the gold-diggers wouldn't be after me once I made the "big bucks."

I am an only child.

And I didn't think my name is Denton. But I guess it beats Devorah. Mrs. Pendelton spit at me in the hall; I ducked just in time.

I wonder if I can find a suit at Bloomies for the World Con?

What do men who read Skin Magazine get for advertising the fact?

I think the boys and I may need to move out of this place.

END

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